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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the isolation of the local black community within the social/cultural perspective. A profile of the community is given in terms of data collected from personal and family interviews. Personal interviews assessed how the Appalachian black viewed his group. Among the 13 variables studied are: trustworthiness, religion, work ethic, intragroup cooperation, discrimination, drinking problems, and educational values. The family interviews inquire as to the religion, education, marital status, occupation, family size, length of residence, type of dwelling, number of vehicles owned, nature of family relations, and income level of families. The blacks are considered to share, to a great extent, the Appalachian lifestyle of advocated abstinence, strong religious, community, and family ties, as well as the contradiction of heavy alcohol consumption among adult males. While sharing in similarities, whites, Cherokees, and blacks of Appalachia are seen to have little interaction with each other. All three groups are found to project negative images to the valley whites and to outsiders. The paper concludes that the black community is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a larger cultural situation that must change in order for the black community to change. (Author/AM)

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THE ISOLATED APPALACHIAN BLACK COMMUNITY

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THE ISOLATED APPALACHIAN BLACK COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION:

The South today is a showplace of progressive racial harmony considering the turbulent confrontations of the mid 50's and early 60's and the current controversy concerning busing in the North. Evidence of the current harmonious situation is illustrated by the recent eventless Selma march celebrating the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the current era. Also more blacks are moving South and more and more blacks hold prestigious elective and appointed government positions as well as owning and operating more businesses. A significant incident is that for two years (1974-75) the National Conference on Blacks in the Criminal Justice System has been held at the University of Alabama, something that would never have been imagined ten years ago. This rapid progress in southern race relations serves to accentuate areas in which social, political and economic progress has lagged behind. This is a study of such an area - the southern appalachian region encompassing northern Georgia, western North Carolina, and south-east Tennessee. This area represents for the most part a cultural anachronism, an area where physical and cultural isolation seems to be strongly correlated. This isolation is deceiving since millions of tourists flood the area six months of the year visiting state and national parks, the Cherokee Indian Reservation and tourist towns such as Gatlinburg, Maggie Valley and Highlands. The tourist impact, however, while significant in terms of economcis, has little relevance concerning subcultural lifestyles of the groups indigenous to this area. The local blacks are the most isolated group.

This paper investigates this phenomenon within the social/cultural perspective.

THE RESEARCH SETTING:

To best understand the isolated Appalachian black community one must first become aware of the larger social environment which it shares with other similar subcultures. Southern Appalachia is unique not only due to its isolation from the mainstream of society but mainly to its multi-racial composition. It consists of three racial groups (Cherokee Indians, whites, and blacks) all having a long tenure in this area. The Cherokee, mountain whites and local blacks share much in common concerning their lifestyles, yet each group remains isolated not only from outside influences but from each other as well. This particualr area is physically isolated from otherwise large, modern municipal settings. To the east is Asheville, North Carolina, to the south, Atlanta, Georgia, to the south-west Chattanooga, Tennessee, while to the north-west lies Knoxville, Tennessee. The mountains, lakes and rivers are paradoxical in that they restrict easy access to and from these communities yet they attract millions of tourists each year. Certain pathways are accessible for outsiders to the tourist areas, yet this has little effect on the local population since they mainly live off of these popular routes. Most importantly a strong sense of in-group cohesion, developed prior to the advent of superhighways and mechanical travel, serves to perpetuate a high degree of "clannishness" within these groups.

A brief historical sketch shows that the Cherokee inhabited this area for over a thousand years. Massive white migration did not occur

until after the 1838 Cherokee Removal. Some whites did intermarry and live among the Cherokees prior to the removal but the closest substantial white settlements at this time were located in the Georgia flatlands. Blacks were brought into this area, ironically, by Cherokee plantation owners. The Cherokee Nation census of 1935 lists 16,532 enrolled Cherokee Indians; 201 whites married into the tribe; and 1,592 black slaves owned by the Cherokee. Even John Ross, the famous Cherokee chief, owned slaves. Appalachian blacks, then have a very unique history, one that squarely placed them on the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

Removal and later the civil war greatly reduced the need for blacks in this area and their numbers never again became significant. Yet certain slave families remained in this area and they are the ancestors of the current Appalachian black communities located within the Smoky Mountain region.

The particular area under investigatin involves the seven western most counties of North Carolina. These are the most isolated of the state's twenty Appalachian counties. Within this area lies the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and North Carolina's section of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. There are no major cities within this region, although many are accessible within a one-hundred fifty mile radius. The only four lane interstate highway through this region is Interstate 40 which passes mainly through uninhabited government land linking Asheville, North Carolina and Knoxville, Tennessee. And while this area has a low population density in comparison to the rest of the state, blacks only account for 3 percent of the area's

permanent population. This compares with a statewide distribution of 24 percent. This area includes the only county out of North Carolina's one hundred counties which has no permanent black residents (Graham County).

Haywood county has the largest black population, most of them residing in the black section of Waynesville. Franklin, in Macon county, has a small black community as does Sylva in Jackson county. Black communities in Cherokee, Clay and Swain counties are insignificant while no blacks reside in Graham county. This study involves two data samples, one which includes the larger black populations of Waynesville, Franklin and Sylva, while the other focuses exclusively on the Sylva black community. Sylva was selected over the other two black communities because it is the most remote. Waynesville lies on the road to Asheville and Franklin on the road to Atlanta. Jackson county, in which Sylva is the county seat, also represents one of the most culturally deprived counties in this southern Appalachian area.

The black community in Sylva actually consists of two communities - Tannery Flats and The Hill Community, both adjacent to each other across the river and railroad tracks from Sylva proper. The town (Sylva) itself consists of two major streets both traveling one-way through town. The main street enters the town from the west and is elevated from the back street. The county court house is situated on a hill overlooking the town, again from the west entrance. The back entrances to the stores, which face the main street, are located on the back street, a story below the main entrances. This means that all stores have a main floor and a basement floor. The rear of the stores lack the facade

presented on the main street and were once used exclusively by blacks and Cherokees. The black community faces the back street of Sylva. Together "Tannery Flats" and "The Hill Community" are commonly referred to as "nigger town" by the local whites. The black community, unlike their valley white counterparts, consists mostly of unpainted single dwelling shacks. The community is located in the industrial area of town right across from the Mead Corporation, a paper pulp mill. It is estimated that 260 blacks live in the Sylva black community accounting for approximately seventy percent of the entire Jackson county black population. Most of the others live seven miles away in Cullowhee, a small town in which Western Carolina University is located. Actually the Jackson county blacks originally lived in Webster, a small community adjacent to Sylva, when it was the county seat. But as the town itself decreased in population so did the black population. By the end of World War II the remaining black residents moved to Sylva. Things have remained much the same since then.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN:

As stated earlier two data sources were used for this study. One consisted of 79 personal interviews designed to ascertain how the Appalachian black viewed his group. This was done using thirteen variables: 1) trustworthiness; 2) religion; 3) clannishness; 4) intragroup cooperation; 5) legal conformity; 6) drinking problems; 7) educational values; 8) work ethic; 9) living conditions; 10) community institution; 11) discrimination; 12) negative stereotypes; and 13) health standards. The sample was selected from the three largest

southern Appalachian black communities in this area; Waynesville, Franklin, and Sylva. Thirty-two (40%) of the respondents were males and forty-seven (60%) were females. Most (86%) lived their entire life in western North Carolina, three percent were originally from other areas of the state, nine percent were from other southern states, while only two percent were from outside the South.

The second data source consisted of twenty-eight family interviews from the Sylva community. Again forty percent (11) of the respondents were males and sixty percent (17) females. The age group of both samples ranged from a few young adults (ages 20-29), some older respondents (age 51 or older), while most were between ages thrity and fifty.

The family interviews inquired as to the religion, education, marital status, occupation, family size, length of residence, type of dwelling, number of vehicles owned, nature of family relations and income level of these families.

The target areas are indicated on the figure below.

Figure 1: Western North Carolina

1 - Haywood county
2 - Swain county
3 - Jackson county
4 - Macon county
5 - Clay county
6 - Graham county
7 - Cherokee county
A - Sylva
B - Waynesville
C - Franklin

THE FINDINGS:

A. Personal Interviews

The results of the personal interviews are presented below according to the thirteen variables measured. Percentages are calculated by columns.

1. Do you feel local blacks are trustworthy?

yes	63	(79%)
no	12	(15%)
n.r.	4	(06%)

2. Are most members of your community churchgoers?

yes	73	(93%)
no	5	(06%)
n.r.	1	(01%)

3. Are local blacks clannish?

yes	60	(76%)
no	16	(20%)
n.r.	3	(04%)

4. Do local blacks cooperate with their non-black neighbors?

yes	70	(89%)
no	8	(10%)
n.r.	1	(01%)

5. Are local blacks law abiding?

yes	64	(81%)
no	11	(14%)
n.r.	4	(05%)

6. Do local blacks have a drinking problem?

yes	52	(66%)
no	21	(26%)
n.r.	6	(08%)

7. Is education a strong value within your group?

yes	71	(90%)
no	6	(08%)
n.r.	2	(02%)

8. Are local blacks good reliable workers?

yes	68	(86%)
no	10	(13%)
n.r.	1	(01%)

9. What is the nature and condition of black homes?

good	26	(33%0
moderate	28	(35%)
adequate	21	(27%)
poor	4	(05%)

10. Which institution has the strongest influence in you community?

church	46	(59%)
school	9	(12%)
family	16	(21%)
n.r.	8	(08%)

11. Do you feel your group is discriminated against?

yes	23	(29%)
no	47	(60%)
n.r.	9	(11%)

12. Do you feel your group presents any negative images to the other non-black groups?

yes	27	(34%)
no	48	(55%)
n.r.	9	(11%)

13. Do you feel health care for your group is adequate?

yes	73	(93%)
no	5	(06%)
n.r.	1	(01%)

B. Family Interviews

1. Religion: Twenty-six (92%) of the families were Baptist attending the black Baptist church located in Tannery Flats. A local, lay minister, the Reverent Smith, is the pastor of the church. Two families (08%) were Methodist and belonged to the other black church in the area, the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Zion church seven miles away in Cullowhee. Each church had closed congregations consisting of approximately five extended family units. Upon observation the black Baptist church was more fundamental in its service. Vocal reinforcement came freely from the congregation and the sermon built up to a peak during the service. The A.M.E. Zion church was more passive and formal in its service. It relies on a circuit pastor to perform services. Both black churches were segregated according to sex. Males sat on the right while children and females sat on the left. Senior members of the church such as deacons sit in the front rows of their section. The congregation consists mainly of females of all ages accompanied by their children and/or siblings and older men. Young and middle-aged males were conspicuously absent from church services .

2. Education: Of the families sampled the following educational information was compiled for the respondent and his or her mate, if applicable.

Educational Level

	8th grade but not 12	completed high school	high school +	N
Males	10 (53%)	8 (42%)	1 (05%)	19
Females	7 (28%)	13 (52%)	5 (20%)	25
	17 (39%)	21 (48%)	6 (13%)	44

* percentages calculated by rows

As of spring of 1975 sixteen local blacks attended the area high school. The high school attrition rate is high in this area not only for blacks but for mountain whites and Cherokees as well. The valley whites are the ones most likely to complete high school. Prior to school integration local blacks had to send their children to the Allen School, a black boarding school, if they expected their children to be properly educated. This involved a weekly 100 mile trip over the Balsam pass, usually by commercial bus.

3. Marital Status: Fifteen of the families interviewed were married, six were widowed, three single, two separated and two divorced.

4. Family size: Surprisingly most families were small and this apparently has always been the trend among the Appalachian blacks. Only three families (10%) had four children, nine (32%) had three children, five (18%) had two children, seven (25%) had one child and four families (14%) had no children. Only one case of an unwed parent was detected in the community.

5. Occupation: The Appalachian black communities are mainly rural non-farm although small household gardens and a few livestock may be raised by some of the families. Sharecropping and farm labor are not available occupations for blacks in this area. The largest employer in Jackson county is the University. In addition five mills operate in the area, the two largest recently ceased operation. The current inflation/recession has had a tremendous impact on this part of North Carolina, affecting all residents. In fact local blacks may

be better off than their white and Cherokee counter parts because of the job security associated with their traditional occupations. Three-quarters of the local blacks in the Sylva-Cullowhee area work at the university in traditional "Jim Crow" occupations as maids, kitchen help, ground keepers, and janitors. The university is a state run institution and has not been visibly affected by the current economic trends. Actually enrollments have increased over the past two years. The other local blacks are either unemployed, retired, or do seasonal housekeeping and caretaker jobs for the summer residents, commonly referred to as "Floridians". Two black females from the Sylva community work in the public school system, one as a librarian and the other as an elementary school teacher. The most common jobs held at the university are maids for females and janitors, ground keepers, cooks, and kitchen helpers for the males. One black family owns a store in Tannery Flats and hires part-time help as cashiers and the like.

6. Residence: Nineteen (68%) of the families surveyed lived their entire life in Sylva, while seven (25%) lived here a least ten years and two (07%) lived here less than ten years. This attests to the fact that few outsiders migrate into the Appalachian black communities. Many young blacks, however, venture out in the search of jobs, marital partners, or excitement. The trend definitely seems to be one of out-migration of young people with little influx of outside blacks. Even the small core of black students, its sole black faculty member and its only black administrator have little to do with the local blacks and travel outside the area for entertainment and other personal needs. Some respondents mentioned that disillusioned

youth who left the community often later returned.

7. Family Relations: One plausible reason why many local blacks eventually return is due to the groups strong sense of family and community. Fifteen of the families (54%) stated that their family relationships were "very good". The other thirteen families (46%) indicated that their family relationships were "good". No one felt their family relationships were fair or poor.

8. Dwellings: Although the homes consist mainly of shacks, most (71%) owned their own home, while a few (14%) rented and the others (15%) lived with their parents. It is not unusual to have a three generation extended family sharing one dwelling. These accomodations serve both an economic and psychological function. The families can pool their financial resources while at the same time provide a strong sense of family cohesion. These multifamily dwellings also resulted in many families having more than one motor vehicle. Thirteen families (45%) had two cars, nine (32%) had one, five (18%) had none and only one family had three vehicles. It should be noted that none of these were late model automobiles. Most were late 1950 and early 1960 models, many were battered.

9. Income Level: Fifty percent of the families thought that according to their income they were in the lower social class. The other half felt they were in the middle class. By conventional standards (Warner, Hollingshead, and Edwards) only two families in the entire black community could properly be assigned middle class status and these are the teacher's families. In one the husband

is the lay minister and store proprieter while in the other family the husband is a grounds keeper at the university.

The local blacks formed their perceptions in relationship to some of the other groups in the area, notably the mountain whites and Cherokees, who live much the same way they do. Here one must keep in mind the concept of relative deprivation since they (the local blacks) are comparing themselves not to some universal standard, but to their non-black Appalachian counterparts who exist in a fashion similar to theirs.

SUMMARY:

The overall profile of the Appalachian black community is one where both physical and cultural isolation plays an important role not only regarding the blacks but affecting their mountain white and Cherokee neighbors as well. All three groups share much in common such as an austere life style, close family and community relationships, closed family churches, restricted physical and social mobility and low social economic achievement motivation. While sharing these similarities these three groups (local blacks, mountain whites, and Cherokees) have little interaction with each other resulting in a high degree of latent inter-group hostilities rarely acted out due to reciprocal avoidance dictated by traditional taboos. All three groups project negative images to the valley whites and outsiders. Rarely do the three groups socially interact. The only time they encounter each other is on Saturday when the town sidewalks become crowded with the menfolks who ritualistically congregate on a weekend basis. Even then

the groups keep to themselves. Segregation patterns even exist in work situations involving multi-racial groups.

This situation closely resembles Simmel's (Coser, 1956) contention that closely knit groups have a tendency to suppress conflict hence intensifying feelings of out-group hostility. Simmel stated that the closer the group, the more intense the conflict. Here one could modify this by stating that the more isolated and cohesive the group, the greater the likelihood of the group will harbor latent hostility toward visibly different groups sharing the same geographical area. Obviously the local blacks are the most visible and the ones most susceptible to latent hostilities. Of these three groups the mountain whites are the most tolerated by the valley whites and outsiders and they in turn prefer the Cherokees over the local blacks although considerable resentment is also directed toward the Cherokee. Similarly, the Cherokee prefer the mountain folks over the local blacks. Consequently the local blacks have little to do with either of their indigenous Appalachian counterparts, although they are quite aware of their presence. They do however come into contact with the valley whites, "Floridians" and the unviersity community through their work and often feel that these people really care for them. Actually these groups seem to have little concern for the local blacks other than as an available source of cheap labor. Blacks are not involved in these groups' social and personal lifestyles. The university, for example, has been in the area for nearly 90 years and no major research or concern has ever been shown regarding the local blacks prior to this study.

The local blacks share to a great extent the Appalachian lifestyle of advocated abstinence, strong religious, community and family ties, as well as the contradiction of heavy alcohol consumption among adult males. This alternate form of escapism is common to both the mountain white and Cherokee males as well. The females, children and older men all make use of the area's primary form of escapism - that of religion. Honky tonks, bars and other public sources of entertainment are absent from these communities. Alcohol cannot be served in Jackson county and beer and wine cannot legally be sold. Bootlegging and moonshining still provide the major source of alcohol in Southern Appalachia. Yet few of these people, especially the local blacks, are arrested or involved in property or violent crimes. They are law abiding as the local police and court records attest. They accept their accomodative position because things have always been this way. The black students at Western Carolina University who participated in this project were infuriated at the local blacks' seeming complacency over their situation.

In conclusion it can be said that the Appalachian black community surely is an anachronism representing a time long since past in the new South. Yet their changing is directly dependent upon the entire area changing. The local blacks are not an isolated phenomenon but rather are part of a larger cultural situation and for the former to change the latter must change first.